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Near East and South Asia Review



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Page

Articles

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Iraq's SU-25 Frogfoot Aircraft

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Iraq's SU-25
Frogfoot Aircraft

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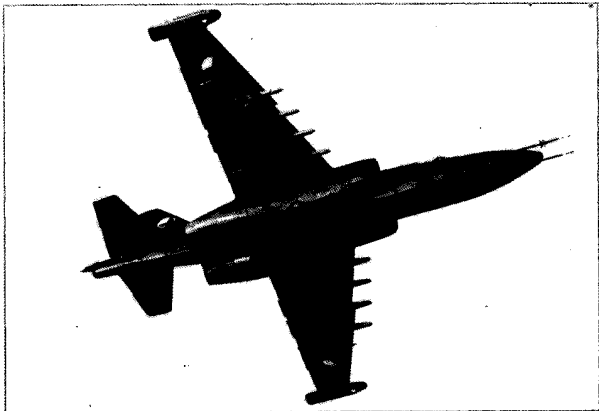
In June 1985, Iraq became the first country outside the Warsaw Pact to receive the Soviet-made SU-25 Frogfoot, a close air support aircraft similar to the US A-10. Although Iraq may use its SU-25s in combat soon, the Frogfoot is unlikely to improve significantly Iraq's air operations against Iranian forces. If the Soviets help the Iraqis develop counterinsurgency tactics for the Frogfoot, it may prove effective against Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq.

Background

Since the beginning of the war with Iran, Iraq has used helicopters and several types of fixed-wing aircraft with varying degrees of effectiveness in ground support missions. In 1981, in an attempt to improve ground-to-air coordination, most Iraqi helicopters were detached from the Air Force and placed under the Army. This left the Air Force with supersonic fighters and some propeller-driven Swiss P-7s for close air support.

The Air Force—the regime's favorite service—undoubtedly argued for a ground attack aircraft of its own. It probably cited the SU-25's larger payload and the fact that it is less vulnerable than other aircraft used by the Iraqi Air Force for close air support to justify the request. The Air Force may have argued that the SU-25's armor protection, speed, and ability to carry air-to-air missiles give it advantages over the Army's Soviet-made MI-24 Hind-D helicopters in the ground attack role. The Iraqis have found the Hinds sluggish and difficult to maneuver, and they have lost some in aerial combat. In contrast, the SU-25 has proved its flexibility in the harsh climate and rugged terrain of Afghanistan.

The Frogfoot is inexpensive for a ground attack aircraft. It uses a modified version of the engine used in the MIG-21 and employs other standardized components. Besides reducing cost, these features should make it easier for the Iraqis—who have experience with the MIG-21—to maintain the Frogfoot.



SU-25 Frogfoot

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Even though arms buying for the war has stretched Iraqi resources, we do not believe Iraq bought the SU-25s in lieu of less expensive attack helicopters. Instead, Iraq probably will continue to buy attack helicopters for the Army in addition to the Frogfoot aircraft already acquired for the Air Force.

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Current Status

Iraq received six SU-25s in December 1985 and now has 18 Frogfoot aircraft. Baghdad probably will obtain another six SU-25s to complete a second squadron (based on the Soviet organization of 12 aircraft per SU-25 squadron).

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The says Iraqi pilots are pleased with the Frogfoot and have great expectations for it.

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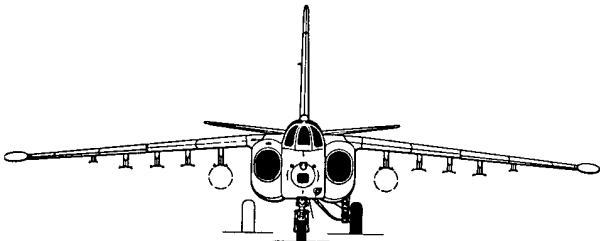
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Frogfoot Armament



SU-25 Frogfoot

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The Frogfoot has one internal twin-barrel 30-mm gun and can carry a mix of the following munitions on its 10 pylons:

- Air-to-ground rockets 57 mm, 80 mm, 240 mm, 330 mm
- Air-to-air missiles AA-2d IR ATOLL, AA-8 APHID
- Air-to-surface missiles AS-7b KERRY, AS-10 KAREN, AS-14
- Bombs 500 kg, 250 kg, 100 kg
- Multiple bomb racks 2x250 kg, 4x100 kg

The SU-25 has a maximum payload of 4.5 metric tons, and its maximum operational radius varies with speed and payload. For example, the Frogfoot could carry six 500-kg bombs and two 600-liter fuel tanks and have a radius of 370 nautical miles.

The Frogfoot may be one of the “new weapons” Baghdad has been threatening to use against the Iranians. If employed properly, it could make Iraqi close air support strikes more destructive. If Iraqi pilots follow their past practices, however, they are likely to operate the SU-25 at too high an altitude to be effective. Baghdad has been consistently unwilling to risk the loss of its aircraft. Even though the Frogfoot is designed to be fast enough to minimize its exposure to ground fire at low altitudes, we believe that the Iraqis will be reluctant to employ it against the moderately well-defended Iranian ground forces in this manner.

Likely Target: The Kurds

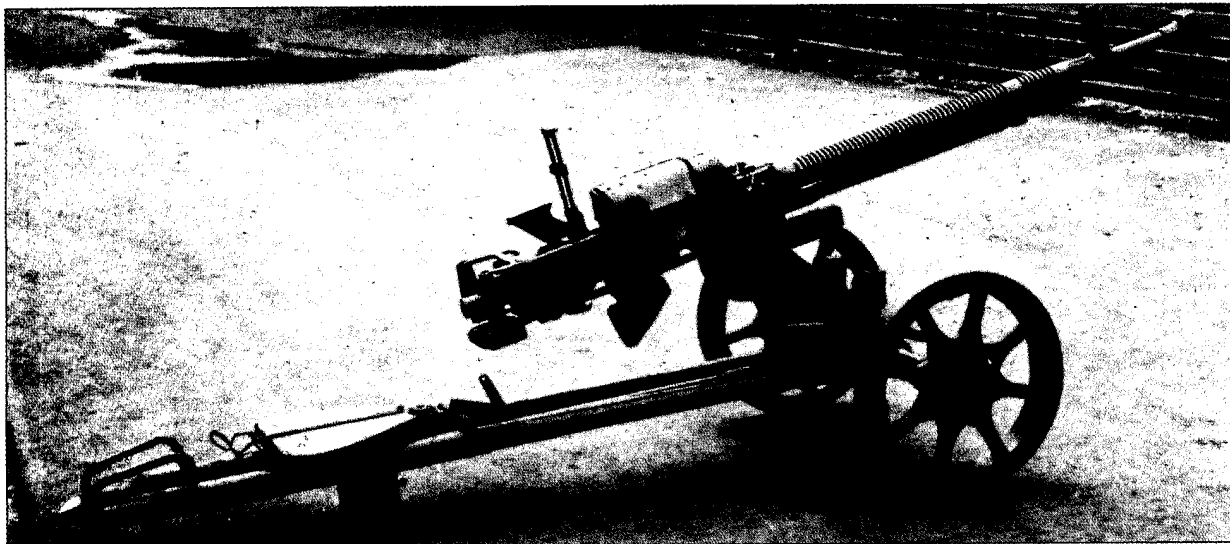
The SU-25s might be better used against the Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq. The Kurds have limited air defense weapons and would be a less dangerous target than Iranian ground forces. Baghdad, aware of the similarities between Iraqi Kurdistan and Afghanistan, might attempt to copy or improve upon Soviet efforts against the Afghan resistance. Soviet arms sales often include training packages, and the deal for the Frogfoot aircraft might include instruction in the counterinsurgency tactics the Soviets have developed in Afghanistan.

The Kurds have shot down Iraqi helicopters with the SA-7, although it is a difficult weapon to use and the Afghan resistance has had little success with it against the Soviets’ SU-25s. Until the Kurds develop new tactics and are better able to use their weapons, Iraq’s use of the SU-25s

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12.7-mm Dsh K heavy machinegun [redacted]

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probably would restrict the Kurds' mobility by forcing them to hide more often or to give up their gains of the past year and withdraw behind Iranian air defenses. [redacted]

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Outlook

Iraq probably will use the Frogfoot initially against Iranian ground forces. Unless it is used to deliver chemical munitions or perhaps napalm, we do not expect it to be decisive in breaking up Iranian assaults. If this is the case, Iraq probably will not acquire more than two squadrons of SU-25s. [redacted]

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Baghdad probably will find greater use for its SU-25s against the Kurdish resistance, particularly if the Kurds continue their recent upsurge in activity in northern Iraq. We believe Iraq could make substantial gains while the Kurds were still learning how to deal with fast, low-flying, fixed-wing aircraft. In time, however, the Kurdish insurgents would adapt and probably resume their previous level of operations. [redacted]

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